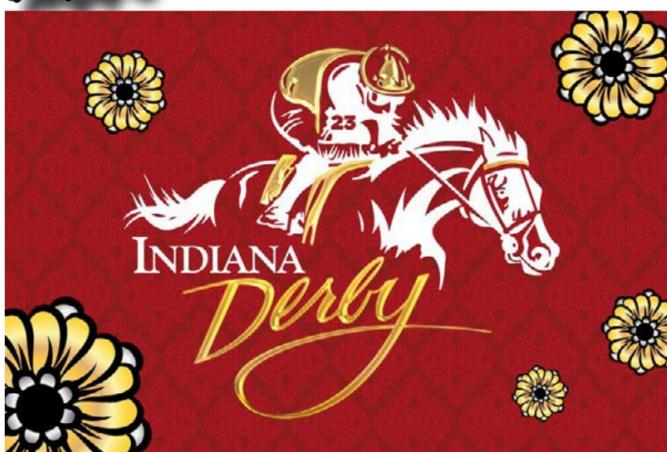




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Calhoun, Hernandez hoping for "Awesome Saturday" in Indiana Derby at Indiana Grand Racing & Casino

Story and Photos By Jennie Rees, Eclipse Award-winning freelance writer



SHELBYVILLE, Ind. (Tuesday, July 11, 2017) — Trainer Bret Calhoun and jockey Brian Hernandez are hoping Awesome Saturday produces just that in Saturday night's \$500,000 Indiana Derby at Indiana Grand.

Chuck Hovitz's 3-year-old son of Any Given Saturday makes his stakes debut in the 1 1/16-mile, Grade 3 race. But he's always run well while making steady improvement in each of his five starts despite self-inflicted miscues. In his last start, Awesome Saturday won an entry-level Churchill Downs allowance race at the Indiana Derby distance by three lengths over the well-regarded Watch Me Whip.

"He was very, very immature physically and mentally," Calhoun said. "He had what I consider babyitis. Nothing major. So we just decided to wait on him. Turned him out. Let him grow up a bit. Still to this day he's a pretty immature horse, physically and mentally. But he's progressing every week, every month, going the right direction."

Awesome Saturday will be taking on a field headed by Irap, winner of Keeneland's Grade 2 Toyota Blue Grass and Thistledown's Grade 3 Ohio Derby.

"I think he's right on the cusp of these caliber of horses," Calhoun said. "If he puts it all together in a race like the Indiana Derby, I think he's going to be a factor."

Awesome Saturday did not make his first start until Feb. 25 at the Fair Grounds in New Orleans. He had a third and two seconds — each by diminishing margins of defeat — in his next three starts before winning the June 25 race at Churchill.

"The physical talent has always been there," Calhoun said. "He just made some mental mistakes, got himself beat. And when he has gotten himself beat, he's gotten beaten by some pretty good horses and hasn't been beaten by much. So he continues to step forward. But I still think there's more to him, and as he gets more physically and mentally mature, you'll see a lot better horse."

Some examples: When Awesome Saturday ran in an allowance race on the Kentucky Derby undercard, he made the lead in a field devoid of speed "and got completely lost out there by himself," Calhoun said. "I thought he was going to stop to walk and they'd run over the top of him. Brian was able to coax him and get him back running. He just got nailed on the wire by the horse of Graham Motion's (No Mo Dough) that won the Sir Barton on Preakness Day.

"The other day, he wanted to go before the rider wanted him too. He wanted to kind of run off down the backside. Brian had him kind of tucked in, going very, very comfortable behind the lead horse and rating real nice. And he got something in his mind that it was time to go and wanted to run off, threw his head at Brian a few times (but) went on and won. He's just doing some things that will get you beat against good horses."

Training young horses involves dealing with a daily series of fine lines.

"How much pressure you put on them in training is like walking a tightrope," Calhoun said. "You want them to do enough to take the next step, but you don't want to overdue it and set them back. And that goes along with the mental aspect, too. You ask them to do too much too early, sometimes you can fry their brain. The owner has been very patient with this horse, hasn't pushed me to do anything.

"He's probably been deserving of running in some of these 3-year-old stakes races over the last couple of months. But I just felt like we could have done more damage than we could good."

Awesome Saturday's camp is hoping the payoff comes Saturday night.

"He won the allowance race impressively," Hernandez said. "You've got to go into the Indiana Derby thinking he fits well. He's a little later 3-year-old, just kind of catching up to the others. So we've got to let him catch up and show how good he is."

Hernandez well knows how that can work. He was the regular rider of Fort Larned, who didn't begin to get it together until the fall of his 3-year-old season. The next year he won the 2013 Breeders' Cup Classic.

"Of course you want them ready for the Derby and all those early Triple Crown prep races," Hernandez said. "But with 3-year-olds, some of them come around later. That seems what this horse is doing. He's just now finding his rhythm."

Calhoun and Hernandez said one of the great things about Awesome Saturday is that he never seems to get tired in workouts, always galloping out strongly no matter the work distance.

"He's just a horse with a lot of energy, which is what we've liked about him all along," Hernandez said. "I worked him Saturday, and I almost couldn't pull him up galloping out. He's the type of horse who likes his job. You have to go into the Indiana Derby thinking he has a big chance."

The 15th season of Thoroughbred and Quarter Horse racing continues through Saturday, Oct. 28. Racing is conducted Tuesday, Wednesday and Friday at 2:05 p.m. EST with Saturday racing beginning at 6:05 p.m. EST. Thursday racing will be held July 6 – Aug. 24 at 2:05 p.m. EST.

About Indiana Grand Racing & Casino: Indiana Grand Racing & Casino holds multiple awards from industry publications for customer service, entertainment, gaming and dining. Located in Shelbyville, Ind., Indiana Grand features 2,200 of the latest slots and electronic table games in addition to a one-mile dirt race course and a seven-eighths mile turf course offering live Thoroughbred and Quarter Horse racing each year. Simulcast wagering is also offered year-round at Winner's Circle Brewpub & OTB located on the casino floor as well as an off-track betting facility located in Clarksville, Ind. For more information, please visit www.IndianaGrand.com.